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SUBJECT: Situation Report 3: Opposition Crowd Dwindles, Ten Plus Coalition Discusses Next Steps

¶1. (C) Summary: The number of protesters on October Square continues to diminish. On March 22, the fourth night of protests on the square, Emboffs observed approximately 1,000 protesters. Ten Plus Coalition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich congratulated protesters for their determination to remain on the square and encouraged all democratic-minded voters convene for a possibly final October Square rally on March 25. Milinkevich reiterated his rejection of the election results and announced the next phase of the opposition campaign is called, "Movement for Freedom." The opposition leader promised his team would provide the specific initiatives of this campaign at the March 25 rally. However, a prominent civil society activist told Pol/Econ Chief on March 23 that society groups, and not members of the Ten Plus, are mainly responsible for providing the Milinkevich team ideas and generally keeping the opposition movement alive. On March 23, the CEC rejected Milinkevich's appeal to annul the elections and reconfirmed Lukashenko won the March 19 elections with 83 percent of the vote. End Summary.

Milinkevich Lays Out Plans During Fourth Night of Protests

¶2. (U) Ten Plus Coalition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich congratulated the crowd of around 1,000 supporters on October Square for their determination and bravery. He noted it was their decision to remain on the square overnight, but called on the protesters and all "those who hold dear Belarus and democratic values" to gather on the square at 12:00 on March 25 to celebrate the 88th anniversary of the Belarusian National Republic, the country's first, brief independence from Russia. At that time he would outline for the opposition the coalition's next steps to continue the momentum for democratic change.

¶3. (U) Responding to protesters' concerns about their likely expulsion from state universities and high schools for participating in the opposition rallies, Milinkevich noted that he was working with the EU Heads of Mission in Minsk to ensure that the protesters, who are mostly college-age youth, will be able to complete their studies in EU countries. He also stated the EU was in the process of expanding the visa ban list to include those who had participated in falsifying the elections.

¶4. (U) Milinkevich departed from the square after his remarks, but returned with his wife in the morning of March 23. Emboffs observed only 150 protesters on the square in the morning and afternoon of March 23.

Security Forces Keep A Watchful Eye On Protesters

¶5. (SBU) Emboffs observed during the evening rally on March 22 and in the morning of March 23 that Belarusian security forces limited the space of the protesters on the square. Dozens of plainclothes security forces surrounded the protesters, serving as a buffer between the protesters and pedestrians not associated with the rally. As during the March 21 evening rally, there was no lighting on the square, making it difficult for journalists and camera crews to cover the rally. Also, Minsk City authorities cleaned away the snow on the large ice skating rink on the square and allowed people to skate on the rink. (Note: On previous nights, protesters occupied all or part of the snow-covered skating rink.)

CEC Rejects Milinkevich's Appeal, Announces Final Results

¶6. (U) On March 23, the Central Election Committee (CEC) convened a public meeting to review Milinkevich's written appeal to annul the results of the March 19 elections and to announce the results of the final vote tabulation.

¶7. (SBU) The Milinkevich team's written appeal noted that the electoral process was deeply flawed, citing the unequal treatment of candidates by Belarusian authorities at all levels, unequal access to state media, the unprecedented number of arrests and confiscations of campaign team activists, and the approximately 1,000 cases of alleged

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election violations during the voting and vote tallying stages on Election Day. After a brief review, the CEC rejected the appeal, arguing that Belarusian authorities committed no acts serious enough to warrant new elections. A senior member of the Milinkevich team later told Pol/Econ Chief that Milinkevich fully expected this decision, but it was important to reveal to Belarusians and the international community the depth of fraud and repression in the Belarusian political system.

¶8. (U) Turning to the final election results, CEC President Lydia Yermoshina noted the final results differed only slightly from the preliminary results announced on March 19: President Lukashenko received 83 percent, Milinkevich 6.1 percent, pro-Lukashenko MP Sergey Gaidukevich 3.5 percent, and opposition candidate Aleksandr Kozulin 2.2 percent. Voter turnout was 92.9 percent. Yermoshina noted that Lukashenko's inauguration ceremony will take place March 31.

Milinkevich Team Discusses Next Steps

¶9. (C) On March 23, Pol/Econ Chief discussed the outcome of Milinkevich's March 22 meeting with his senior staff with Aleksandr Bukhvostov, an independent labor union leader and key member of the Milinkevich campaign team. The executive committee (or "political council") of the Ten Plus Coalition decided use the March 25 rally on October Square as the venue for announcing the next stage of the campaign. The team decided to call the next phase of the campaign, "Movement for Freedom."

¶10. (C) Bukhvostov explained the team is still developing specific initiatives for the Movement for Freedom campaign, but it will likely involve:
-- an information campaign on the fraudulent results and the need for democratic change;
-- an appeal to the international community to demand that

Belarus hold new elections and that the OSCE be fully responsible for organizing them;
-- an appeal to the U.S. and EU to apply tougher sanctions against Lukashenko and key members of his regime;
-- an appeal to the U.S. and EU to apply stronger pressure to Russia to withdraw its support of the regime;
-- a special program aimed at encouraging the youth to understand the personal benefits of a democratic Belarus;
-- a partnership with several universities in EU countries to provide scholarships to Belarusian students who have been expelled from state universities for their political activities; and,
-- preparation for the 2007 municipal elections.

Milinkevich Remains Leader of Ten Plus, Kozulin Cut Off

¶11. (C) Bukhvostov noted that the Ten Plus executive committee also named Milinkevich their leader for the indefinite future. Bukhvostov noted the Ten Plus concluded that Milinkevich enjoys the highest name recognition among opposition leaders of the Ten Plus and has demonstrated his ability to lead the entire opposition camp. Bukhvostov admitted that this issue will likely be revisited when key leaders like Anatoly Lebedko are released from prison, but he doubted anyone would make a serious claim against Milinkevich's status as Ten Plus leader in the near future.

¶12. (C) Bukhvostov also confirmed that the Ten Plus executive committee decided to suspend cooperation with opposition candidate Kozulin. The majority on the executive committee believes that Kozulin only hinders the opposition campaign, citing as proof Kozulin's recent "over-the-top" criticism of Milinkevich for failing to abide by an agreement to encourage protesters to leave October Square.

In Reality, Civil Society Holding Up Milinkevich Team

¶13. (C) On March 23, civil society activist Alyona Volynets offered Pol/Econ Chief a sober perspective of the Milinkevich team's ability to lead the next phase of the

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opposition campaign for democratic change. Volynets, Director of the Executive Committee of the Belarusian Assembly of Democratic NGOs, explained the Milinkevich team is an extremely weakened state. Volynets noted the Milinkevich team was ill prepared to lead the democratic forces following the March 19 elections. Moreover, the arrests of key members of the Milinkevich team since the elections have severely limited the team's ability to organize the opposition for further action.

¶14. (C) When asked about Milinkevich's announcement to form a Movement for Freedom, Volynets said this initiative was her organization's idea. Volynets stressed that the Belarusian Assembly of Democratic NGO's is happy to provide proposals to the Milinkevich team because civil society in general believes in Milinkevich and wants to help him lead the opposition.

¶15. (C) Volynets added that her organization is pushing the Milinkevich team to convene another session of the Democratic Congress before Summer 2006. The Belarusian Assembly of Democratic NGO's believes such an event would help revitalize the opposition following the presidential elections and maintain the attention of democratic-minded Belarusians and the international community on opposition initiatives. Volynets argued that the delegates to a possible congress should be expanded to include "the new members of the opposition" (i.e., the young protesters who have been gathering on October Square since March 19).

(Note: Bukhvostov earlier told Pol/Econ Chief that the Ten Plus decided that the current level of GOB repression is too high to organize another democratic congress session.

Comment

¶16. (C) The number of protesters on October Square continues to dwindle and the Milinkevich team has yet to develop concrete plans for leading the opposition. Although the Ten Plus has taken a step forward by deciding on a name for the next stage of their campaign, "Movement for Freedom," the specific initiatives for this campaign remain vague. Fortunately for Milinkevich, civil society organizations such as the Belarusian Assembly of Democratic NGO's have demonstrated an active interest in keeping the Ten Plus Coalition afloat.

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